FROM PATERNALISM TO PARTNERSHIP:
AUSTRALIA’S RELATIONS WITH ASEAN

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ABSTRACT

In the thirty years since the creation of ASEAN, the relations between Southeast Asia and Australia have changed dramatically. Nowhere is this more evident than in the economic sphere. The sustained rapid economic growth of most ASEAN countries in the following three decades has ensured that Australia’s relative economic importance to the region—as a market, a source of investment, or a source of development assistance—has declined significantly. Australia’s share in ASEAN’s exports has shrunk to 2 per cent. In contrast, the ASEAN share of Australia’s total exports has more than doubled in the past thirty years. ASEAN’s new importance to Australia stems not only from the region’s economic growth but also from Canberra’s efforts to reorient Australian foreign, defence, and trade policies towards the Asia-Pacific region in general and East Asia in particular. The advent of the Hawke Labor government heralded a new era of relations between Australia and ASEAN that was characterised by a substantial broadening of the agenda for cooperation, and a new coincidence of interests, for example, in the promotion of global trade liberalisation—but also new sources of tension as both ASEAN and Australia pursued more activist foreign policies. By placing emphasis on ‘open regionalism’ and ‘co-ordinated unilateralism’ as the key principles for APEC, the Australian government has, with the brief exception of a period of wavering in the first half of 1995, supported ASEAN’s consensual, gradualist approach to economic cooperation. If Australian governments have moved towards adopting the ASEAN way in their diplomacy with their Southeast Asian neighbours, ASEAN states at times have shown little reciprocity or, indeed, public understanding of the constraints under which Australian governments operate in, for instance, their relations with Australian media.
FROM PATERNALISM TO PARTNERSHIP: AUSTRALIA’S RELATIONS WITH ASEAN

John Ravenhill*

In my view we in Australia have been quite unduly preoccupied with the South-east Asian area...South-east Asia and the South-west Pacific area are important to us not primarily in connection with the objective of security, or with that of prosperity but in connection with our need to recognize purposes beyond ourselves. The countries of this area are our neighbours, and through contact with them we can enlarge our understanding of the human condition. They provide our easiest point of contact with the aspirations of the Third World for justice and change, which have to be accommodated within the global order on whose continuance all our objectives depend (Bull, 1973:148).

There is reason to doubt whether the growing economic strength, the increased internal political stability and the developing self-confidence of the member states of ASEAN have fully registered on the Australian consciousness. Having become used to thinking of the region primarily in terms of security, defence and aid, it has not been easy to recognise the significance of the changes and what they purport in terms of policy and—even more—states of mind. Attitudes of patronage, at least understandable in earlier circumstances but now completely inappropriate, have still not entirely disappeared. They lurk behind the still current ideas of a ‘special relationship’ and of Australia as a ‘bridge’ between the region and the world. They are evident in exaggerated views of the importance to the region of both our aid and of our opinions. The inappropriateness of these older attitudes is highlighted by the fact that increasingly they coexist uneasily with doubts and uncertainty about our role and standing in the region (Committee on Australia’s Relations with the Third World, 1979:125).

Australia is accepted within the South-east Asian region as being in it but not quite of it, which is broadly how Australia sees herself (Millar, 1978:436).

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No industrialised nation has more at stake in South-East Asia’s economic development than Australia. Arguably, too, our interests are more closely aligned to those of South-East Asia than any other OECD nation (East Asia Analytical Unit, 1992:xxxviii).

...every regional initiative Australia has taken in recent years has depended for its success or failure on ASEAN’s reaction (Woolcott, 1995:20).1

Australia was not present at [the ASEM] meeting, on either side...That part of the world which is completely dominant in Australia’s economic, immigration, tourism and education flows, and in political and cultural influence in Australia’s regional habitat, was closed to Australia politically. An outsider, Australia had no vote in this coalition, no voice...To be denied participation in the critical political councils of the coalition of states which dominates us economically is comparable to a colonial status for Australia (FitzGerald, 1997:2).

Derision would have greeted the commentator who, on the foundation of the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967, suggested that within one generation:

- An ASEAN state would surpass Australia in per capita GNP;
- ASEAN economies, taken collectively, would become the largest single market for Australia’s exports of elaborately transformed manufactures;2
- The Australian government would sign a defence agreement with Indonesia and become the principal supplier of military training to the Indonesian armed forces (ABRI);
- ASEAN would enjoy a veto power over Australia’s most significant foreign policy initiatives—APEC, and its aspiration for membership in the Asia–Europe meeting [ASEM]. Hence:
- Australian governments would come to regard the relationship with ASEAN as equal in importance to those with the United States and Japan.3

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1 Richard Woolcott is a former Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
2 Australian trade data distinguish simply transformed from elaborately transformed manufactures. The former consist principally of refined minerals.
3 A strong case can be made for this last assertion for the Keating Labor government of 1993–96. The current Coalition government, under Prime Minister John Howard, has generally placed less emphasis on multilateral organisations. In the Foreign Affairs White Paper that the government issued in August 1997 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997b), the government emphasised bilateral relations as the ‘basic building block’ of the country’s foreign policy, and nominated Indonesia as one of four priority countries for Australia. The White Paper committed the government to building closer relations with the ASEAN Free
In the mid-1960s, Australians were enjoying the long post-war boom that had fuelled Australia’s resource-driven economy. Although military involvement in Vietnam and the possibility of British entry into the European Community were clouds on the horizon, the overall mood was one of prosperity and security. Australia did indeed appear to be, in the words of a best selling book of the period, the ‘lucky country’ (Horne, 1964). In contrast, Southeast Asia appeared mired in political and economic instability. Indonesia’s confrontation with Malaysia, which brought Australian forces into direct conflict with those of the largest Southeast Asian state and its nearest neighbour, reinforced impressions of the political fragility of the region. Meanwhile, the breakup of the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 cast doubt on the economic future of its members. In this period, the per capita income of Singapore, the wealthiest of the ASEAN economies, was less than one-third of that of Australia.

Thirty years on, the transformation has been dramatic. Singapore’s per capita income now exceeds that of Australia. By 1994, ASEAN had overtaken New Zealand as the single largest market for Australia’s exports of elaborately transformed manufactures (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1995:Table 15, p.71). In the security sphere, the Australian and Indonesian governments negotiated a defence agreement, which was described by a senior Australian Foreign Affairs official as ‘possibly the most significant diplomatic achievement in Australia in the past 25 years’ (unnamed official quoted in Sydney Morning Herald, 15 December 1995). And, as the quotation from Richard Woolcott at the head of this paper suggests, ASEAN has become the key to Australia’s attempts in the last decade to reorient its foreign policies to promote closer engagement with East Asia.

ASEAN’s new importance to Australia results in part from Canberra’s efforts to reorient Australian foreign, defence, and trade policies towards the Asia–Pacific region in general and East Asia in particular. A 1989 decision to seek ‘comprehensive engagement’ with the region formalised this reorienta-

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4 Then Prime Minister, Paul Keating, used the occasion to repeat his statement: ‘No country is more important to Australia than Indonesia.’
tion, but it had been evident in the policies of the Hawke Labor government since its election in 1983. Two other factors have been particularly important. One is the rapid economic growth sustained by most ASEAN member states over two decades. The other is the recent widening (geographical extension to nine, probably soon ten countries), and deepening of ASEAN. The broadening of the scope of the group’s activities through the establishment of the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA) and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) has enhanced its influence. Yet at the same time as ASEAN has become more important for Australia, the significance of Australia for ASEAN in some domains, particularly economic, has been shrinking. The data in Figure One provide a dramatic illustration of the increasing asymmetry in the economic relationship. Whereas the ASEAN share of Australia’s total exports has more than doubled in the thirty years since ASEAN’s formation, Australia’s share in ASEAN’s exports has shrunk to 2 per cent. The consequence is a dramatic widening in the imbalance of trade, Australia now enjoying a very substantial surplus on the merchandise trade balance (Figure 2).

The data in Figure 1 also reflect changes arising from the substantial difference in the overall economic performance over the last two decades of Australia and ASEAN economies. Although ASEAN has consumed an increasing proportion of Australian exports, this growth has been insufficient to maintain Australia’s share of the booming ASEAN import market. For ASEAN, the converse applies. The rate of growth of ASEAN exports to Australia has been insufficient to maintain Australia’s market share in ASEAN exports. Nevertheless, it has been sufficiently strong to increase ASEAN’s share of the Australian import market. Moreover, the aggregate data obscure the marked change in composition of imports from ASEAN—away from fuels and raw materials to manufactured goods.

The Australian government failed to anticipate the remarkable success of the ASEAN economies. In 1980, the Commonwealth Department of the Treasury confidently predicted that:

With the exception of Singapore, the ASEAN countries seem bound to remain exporters predominantly of commodities and not manufactures—because of their endowments of natural resources and because of their complementary relationships with more industrialised economies in the region and elsewhere (The Treasury, 1980:1313).

By the mid 1990s, manufactures constituted more than half of the export earnings of Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand, as well as Singapore.
Australia has not only become less significant as a trade partner for ASEAN but also as a source of investment and overseas development assistance (ODA). In the 1980s, when companies from Japan and Taiwan in particular rapidly increased their foreign direct investments (FDI) in ASEAN economies, Australian companies engaged in substantial divestment of their ASEAN assets. Australia currently barely registers in the country breakdown of FDI stocks in ASEAN economies. Although the flow of investment did pick up in the mid-1990s, ASEAN’s overall share in the total stock of Australian FDI has collapsed since the late 1970s as Australian companies sought to invest in the more familiar markets of Britain and the United States (Table 1).

Table 1: ASEAN Share in the Stock of Australian Foreign Direct Investment

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<tr>
<td>Value (A$m)</td>
<td>1193</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>1635</td>
<td>8154</td>
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<tr>
<td>Share of global total (%)</td>
<td>28.3</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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Sources: Bureau of Industry Economics (1995); East Asia Analytical Unit (1992); Commonwealth of Australia (1997).

Australia has similarly declined in significance as a source of aid for ASEAN economies—although it still ranks substantially higher as an aid donor than as a foreign investor. In the early 1990s, Australia was the fifth largest bilateral donor to ASEAN economies—after Japan, the United States, France, and Germany. In the 1970s, Australia had ranked from second to fourth in bilateral assistance to the individual ASEAN economies. In 1994–95, ASEAN economies received over 20 per cent of Australia’s total ODA, a share that has remained constant over the last 25 years. Indonesia has consistently been the second most favoured country recipient of Australian aid (after Papua New Guinea), accounting for close to 9 per cent of the total (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 1997).

Lee Kwan Yew’s frequently voiced warning that, without significant policy and attitudinal reforms, Australians (‘the loafers of the Pacific’) were destined to become the ‘poor white trash’ of Asia may not yet have been realised. Nonetheless, the marked disparity in economic performance between ASEAN and Australia in the last two decades has produced dramatic changes in relative strengths. The data in Table 2 illustrate these changes, which
inevitably go beyond the economic domain to affect other areas such as military capabilities.6

Table 2  Australia—ASEAN Relativities (ratio of Australian to ASEAN data)

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<tr>
<td>Total GNP</td>
<td>1.55</td>
<td>1.33</td>
<td>1.06</td>
<td>1.01</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.73</td>
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<tr>
<td>GNP per capita</td>
<td>25.65</td>
<td>22.44</td>
<td>19.13</td>
<td>18.49</td>
<td>14.89</td>
<td>13.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Manufacturing Value Added</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
<td>1.43</td>
<td>1.02</td>
<td>0.85</td>
<td>0.54</td>
<td>n.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Expenditure</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>0.72</td>
<td>0.68</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
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Notes: Data for ASEAN include the five original members—Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, and Singapore—and, after 1984, Brunei.


Despite these remarkable changes in the context of Australian—ASEAN relations over the past thirty years, several continuities are evident:

- Australian governments have consistently supported the objectives of ASEAN as expressed in its treaties and voiced by the governments of its member states. Australia, indeed, was a pioneer in its relations with ASEAN. In April 1974, Australia was the first country formally to recognise ASEAN as a multilateral organisation and to become a dialogue partner. In the same year, it was the first country to extend economic assistance to ASEAN regional projects through the ASEAN–Australian

6 Such comparisons beg a variety of questions. How relevant is it to compare data for Australia with that for ASEAN as a group? For instance, in military expenditure, Australia still outsends individual ASEAN countries by a significant amount. A comparison with ASEAN as a whole would be most relevant if a realistic possibility existed that conflict would occur between Australia and a united ASEAN group, an unlikely scenario. And will ASEAN maintain its significance for Australia should a substantial decline take place in the rate of ASEAN’s economic growth? Perhaps not, but ASEAN is now sufficiently important to the Australian economy that the slowdown in ASEAN economies resulting from the currency market instability of 1997 is projected to have a negative impact on Australian economic growth for 1998. As long as ASEAN stays united, its role in APEC and in the ARF is likely to ensure that it will remain an important diplomatic partner for Australia.
Economic Cooperation Program. In 1978, Australia became the first country with which ASEAN established a formal consultative structure on trade matters (the ASEAN–Australia Consultative Meetings, comprising the heads of ASEAN diplomatic missions in Canberra and the Australian Interdepartmental Committee on Relations with ASEAN).

- Australia’s support for ASEAN notwithstanding, ongoing tension between ASEAN and Australian governments has occurred over the definition of the relevant geographical region for economic and political cooperation. From the proposal of the Whitlam government for an Asia–Pacific forum, to the establishment of Pacific Economic Cooperation Conference (later Council) (PECC), to Australian sponsorship of the Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) grouping, Australian governments have consistently lobbied in favour of regional groups whose membership is broader than that of ASEAN. These moves have equally consistently been viewed with suspicion by ASEAN states as posing a challenge to ASEAN’s lead role in regional cooperation and, indeed, as a threat to ASEAN’s integrity.

- Australian governments have generally been sceptical of the effectiveness and utility of ASEAN as an economic grouping.

- Australian governments’ desire to build close working relations with ASEAN has sometimes conflicted with the wish to pursue activist, independent foreign policies. ASEAN has reacted critically on those occasions when Australian governments have taken a stance different from its own on regional issues. A balance satisfactory to both parties between Australian foreign policy autonomy and accepting the ‘ASEAN way’ has yet to be established.

- The enthusiasm with which Australian governments have pursued engagement with ASEAN has varied according to the political complexion of the government in Canberra.

The early years

For the first thirty years after the end of World War II, security considerations dominated Australia’s relations with Southeast Asia. Australia’s interest in the region, in conjunction with its ‘great and powerful friends’—Britain, and then the United States—was shaped by its fears of communist expansion and of the potential destabilisation of Australia’s Commonwealth partners of Malaysia and Singapore. ASEAN’s foundation coincided with the peak of Australian involvement in the Vietnam war. The conservative (Liberal/Country Party) Coalition government in Canberra welcomed ASEAN’s formation in large part because it hoped that the new regional organisation would promote an environment more conducive to national and regional political stability. It saw
ASEAN contributing to such stability both by establishing a framework for sustained economic growth and by providing a forum to defuse tensions among the member states.

By the early 1970s, the limits of Australia’s security-oriented approach to the region were becoming increasingly apparent. The two principal regional arrangements in which Australia was involved—the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (SEATO) and the Asian and Pacific Council (ASPAC)—appeared increasingly anachronistic at a time when Western powers were establishing diplomatic relations with Beijing and winding back their involvement in the Vietnam conflict. The Coalition government’s enthusiasm for the Five Power Defence Agreements (in which Australia joined with New Zealand and the UK in supporting the security of Malaysia and Singapore) no longer seemed to be matched by that of the states whose defence the agreement was purportedly promoting. Although it did not formally oppose ASEAN’s 1971 adoption of the Malaysian proposal to establish a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality (ZOPFAN) in Southeast Asia, the Coalition government reacted cautiously, seeing the proposal as having the potential to undermine Canberra’s efforts at encouraging continued US military involvement in the region.

These momentous changes in the security environment provided the context in which the Whitlam Labor government came to power in 1972. The new government hastened to end Australia’s involvement in Vietnam, showed a marked distaste for the Cold War alliances of SEATO and ASPAC, endorsed the ZOPFAN proposal, and sought to establish a new framework for relations with ASEAN states (Albinski, 1977; Mackie, 1976a; Mackie, 1976b). The new emphasis was on improved dialogue and on economic relations—hence the initiation of an aid program to ASEAN regional projects in 1974. Whitlam’s ambition to establish a broader consultative grouping, the Asia-Pacific Forum, a proposal he failed to elaborate in any detail but which was clearly intended to include Northeast as well as Southeast Asia, was received with polite

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7 The other members of SEATO were France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the UK, and the United States. Besides Australia, ASPAC linked Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, New Zealand, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand, and South Vietnam.
Scepticism by ASEAN states. The unstated concern was that a wider Asian grouping would overshadow ASEAN.\textsuperscript{8}

Although the Whitlam government had added an economic dimension to the relationship, the focus was on aid. Trade issues continued to be discussed on a bilateral basis. In 1974, the Australian government had asked the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand to agree to voluntary restraints on their exports of textiles and clothing to Australia—at a time when their economies were suffering from the effects of the OPEC-induced oil price rise and subsequent global recession. Meanwhile, Australia continued to enjoy a trade surplus with these countries. A failure to reach agreement on voluntary restraints led to Australia’s unilaterally imposing quantitative restrictions in July 1975. In the following February, the government switched from quantitative restrictions to the use of tariff quotas to control imports. But these were no more acceptable to the ASEAN states. The implementation of the quota scheme favoured the established suppliers of Northeast Asia because the distribution of import licenses followed prior importing practices (for details of the dispute see Edwards, 1978). Imports of textiles and clothing from ASEAN economies fell.

ASEAN Economic Ministers at their meeting in Jakarta in November 1975, agreed on a joint approach in lobbying trading partners for reduction of barriers to ASEAN exports. The first ASEAN summit in the following year endorsed the process, which the establishment of the ASEAN Secretariat also facilitated. In November 1976, ASEAN initiated an effective lobbying process in Australia by presenting a Trade Memorandum to the Australian government—effective, that is, not so much in achieving the desired result of a change in Australian trade policies but in exposing the contradictions in the Fraser government’s approach to ASEAN. The memorandum (and a second, sent two years later) voiced complaints about the protectionist consequences of Australia’s industry assistance policies, the failure of Australia to engage in prior consultation on trade policy measures that affected ASEAN’s interests, and about the limited benefits for ASEAN economies of Australia’s tariff preferences for less developed countries. Australia, in 1966, had been the first country to introduce a generalised system of preferences scheme, of which all ASEAN states were beneficiaries. But like all such schemes, that developed by Australia was highly selective, excluding products regarded as ‘sensitive’ for

\textsuperscript{8} Whitlam apparently did not consult ASEAN leaders before announcing the proposal.
domestic producers. Moreover, the scheme had two other major limitations. Tariff preferences were withdrawn when suppliers were judged to have become ‘competitive’. And, until the government finally abolished preferences for British exports in 1981, tariff rates on more than 500 items were lower for products of British origin than those from less developed economies. Edwards (1978:22) commented that the ‘inescapable conclusion is that Australia’s GSP has not contributed to any significant increase in ASEAN exports to Australia’.

The response of the Fraser Coalition government (that was to hold office from November 1975 to March 1983) focused on procedural matters rather than on new trade concessions. The government’s populist attitude towards industry and trade matters appeared to owe much to the electoral backlash that greeted the Whitlam government’s 1974 decision to cut Australian tariffs by 25 per cent. The ASEAN memorandum did make the government more conscious of the problems of lack of policy coordination in Canberra on ASEAN issues. In response, in January 1977, the government established a Standing Interdepartmental Committee on relations with ASEAN. In August 1977, in his meeting with ASEAN leaders following the Kuala Lumpur summit, Fraser agreed to improve consultation on trade matters. This promise led to the creation in November 1978 of the ASEAN–Australia Consultative Meetings. These in turn established a working group on trade matters to provide ‘early warning’ of changes in Australian policies that might affect ASEAN interests

Despite the new consultative mechanisms, ASEAN’s new capacity to speak with one voice on trade matters clearly disconcerted some elements in the Australian government. The Department of Foreign Affairs lamented the new asymmetry in the relationship—one heightened, no doubt, by the weakness and lack of independence of the ASEAN Secretariat:

ASEAN has now reached the stage in its development where the Association’s corporate identity and the future of that identity is [sic] secure. ASEAN countries, however, retain the ability to negotiate either bilaterally or as a bloc depending on the assessment of which method best serves their interests. They have well-developed mechanisms to adopt bloc positions and negotiate as a bloc. Individual countries, including Australia, have found that the reverse situation does not apply; except during the regular, but not frequent consultations which form a part of ASEAN’s diplomatic year, such as the ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ meeting with dialogue partners, and, for Australia, the ASEAN–Australia dialogue meeting; and it is not always easy for individual non-ASEAN countries to respond to ASEAN as a bloc (Department of Foreign Affairs, Evidence before Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence, quoted in Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1984:86).
The Fraser government was unwilling to respond to ASEAN demands for Australian trade liberalisation. Instead, the Prime Minister offered increased aid under the ASEAN–Australian Economic Cooperation Program. The government’s unpersuasive argument on trade protection was that ASEAN would benefit from the stronger Australian economy that such measures would help to create:

In the short term, major improvements in market access for ASEAN manufactured goods in sensitive areas pose difficult problems for Australia, but longer term development in the Australian economy may be expected to create greater trading opportunities for ASEAN. That is not to say that the Australian Government is not aware of, or sympathetic towards, the particular trading problems of the ASEAN countries (Liberal Party of Australia, ‘How Australia Supports ASEAN’, Current Political Notes No. 54 (18 July 1977) p. 3 quoted in Edwards, 1978:20).

A marked improvement in the trade relations between Australia and ASEAN would have to await the renewed liberalisation of the Australian economy, undertaken in earnest from the mid-1980s by the Hawke and Keating Labor Party governments. ASEAN’s collective action on trade matters, however, did win one significant victory in the second half of the 1970s. In 1978, the Australian government attempted to bolster the profits of the national airline, QANTAS, by limiting the capacity of other airlines on the Australia–Europe route. The proposals would have had a significant adverse effect on only one ASEAN airline—Singapore Airways—but Singapore’s protests were taken up by ASEAN as a whole (and presented, in part, as a North–South issue). Again, ASEAN was successful in embarrassing the Fraser government by skillfully arguing its case in the Australian media. The eventual resolution of the issue, in May 1979, met most of the ASEAN demands (for details see Frost, 1982:159–62).

The Fraser government’s relations with ASEAN on security matters were little more successful than those on trade—despite the apparent coincidence of interests especially following Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia in 1978. To a significant extent, this failure to engage with ASEAN can be blamed on the Australian Prime Minister’s preoccupation with a perceived threat of Soviet expansionism, a threat he believed could only be countered effectively by an enhanced US military presence in the region. ASEAN preferred instead to emphasise its commitment to ridding the region of great power competition through the realisation of its ZOPFAN proposal (Brown, 1980). Fraser’s arrogant and hectoring style did little to endear him to ASEAN leaders, who rebuffed his attempt to obtain an invitation to the initial ASEAN summit.
The one area where relations with ASEAN produced more cooperative outcomes in the Fraser years was the treatment of refugees from the Indochina conflicts. Australian governments had initially been unwilling to accept substantial numbers of refugees—the Whitlam government in part because of its sympathies towards the Vietnamese regime; Fraser’s because of domestic concerns about unemployment and race relations. Under pressure from ASEAN and from the continued arrival of boats on Australian shores, the Fraser government negotiated an agreement with ASEAN in mid-1978 that provided for a larger refugee intake but also for ASEAN countries to attempt to stem the flow of boats headed for Australia. By the end of the decade, Australia could boast that it had accepted, on a per capita basis, more Indochinese refugees than any other industrialised country (Viviani, 1983; 1984).

The Hawke/Keating years: redefining Australia’s relations with Asia

The election of the first Hawke Labor government in March 1983 occurred at roughly the halfway point in ASEAN’s first thirty years. It heralded a new era of relations between Australia and ASEAN that was characterised by a substantial broadening of the agenda for cooperation, and a new coincidence of interests—but also new sources of tension as both ASEAN and Australia pursued more activist foreign policies.

The new agenda evolved in response both to changing international economic and security environments and to new directions in domestic policies. The global economic recession in the early 1980s and the consequent collapse in commodity prices forced Australian and ASEAN governments alike to reconsider their economic strategies. Liberalisation became the dominant theme, encouraged by the growing influence, domestically and internationally, of neo-classical economic ideas (on Australia see Pusey, 1991; on Indonesia see Barichello and Flatters, 1991 and Hill, 1996). Although liberalisation was at times halting and uneven, the general direction was unambiguous. For Australia’s relations with ASEAN, the great advantage to this policy shift was that it brought a new consistency between domestic and foreign economic policies. Canberra was no longer as vulnerable to ASEAN criticisms that it failed to practice domestically the free trade policies that it advocated internationally (although relatively high levels of protection for the textile, clothing and footwear sectors, as well as automobiles, attracted continued ASEAN concern).

Domestic economic liberalisation, coupled with increasing uncertainty about the future openness of the global economy, brought a renewed interest in
collaboration between Australia and ASEAN in promoting world trade reform. Shared economic characteristics contributed to this overlap of interests. Australia and ASEAN countries alike have unusually diversified patterns of trade. All stood to lose heavily should the global economy fragment into rival regional trading blocs. And, despite domestic economic restructuring, which would accelerate as liberalisation from the mid-1980s fostered more efficient local manufacturing, agricultural exports continued to contribute substantially to the total export earnings of most ASEAN economies as well as Australia. The Australian initiative of promoting agricultural trade policy reform in the Uruguay Round by establishing a coalition of small and medium-sized economies with significant dependence on agricultural exports (the Cairns Group) attracted ASEAN support.9

The rapid growth of manufacturing in ASEAN brought new complementarities based on increasing intra-industry trade to the economic relationship. From 1992 to 1996, for instance, two-way trade in machinery, mechanical appliances and electrical equipment tripled in value to more than US$3 billions (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1997a). Both sides welcomed the liberalisation efforts of their partners. The Australian government, however, shared the scepticism of most academic commentators about the utility of the ASEAN Free Trade Area. A study of AFTA by the East Asia Analytic Unit of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade concluded that in its current form AFTA ‘would have only a limited impact’, and suggested that the ‘Australian Government should urge ASEAN to regard AFTA as a step towards more comprehensive liberalisation, not as a substitute for it’ (East Asia Analytical Unit, 1994, ‘Executive Summary’). Australian concerns centred more on the possibility that AFTA might divert ASEAN efforts away from APEC and from global trade negotiations than on any adverse impact the arrangement would be likely to have on Australian trade.

Australian enthusiasm for AFTA did increase somewhat after the suggestion by Thai Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Supachai, that governments should explore the possibility of a link between AFTA and the Australia–New Zealand Closer Economic Relations Trade Agreement (ANZCERTA). Subsequent talks identified seven areas for cooperation, namely: exchange of information; human resource development; customs matters; standards and conformance; trade and investment facilitation and promotion; competition

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9 Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand are all members of the Group (for an early analysis see Higgott and Cooper, 1990).
policy; and industrial co-operation (Lim and Teh Jr, 1996). Little scope appears to exist, however, for a more formal linkage between the two groupings, not least because ANZCERTA has already achieved much deeper integration than is proposed for AFTA over the next decade. Support for additional regional discriminatory trading arrangements would also run counter to the Australian government’s preference for multilateral trade liberalisation on a non-discriminatory basis.

Disagreement over the merits of AFTA was indicative of the increased potential for conflict as Australia and ASEAN alike sought to pursue more proactive foreign policies in an increasingly fluid international environment. Although on some issues an identity of interests existed, on others Canberra inevitably adopted a position different to that taken by ASEAN. The initiative on Cambodia proposed by then foreign minister Bill Hayden soon soured relations between the Hawke government and ASEAN. Australian policies on Cambodia had caused annoyance to ASEAN as far back as 1974. In February 1981, the Fraser government formally announced that Australia would withdraw its recognition of the Pol Pot regime, a decision taken after increasing public outcry at the human rights abuses of the Khmer Rouge government. One of the first foreign policy decisions of the Hawke government was to withdraw from co-sponsorship of the annual ASEAN resolution on Cambodia at the UN General Assembly, on the grounds that the resolution was unbalanced in criticising Vietnam but not Pol Pot. Hayden followed up with a vague proposal that Australia should play the role of ‘mediator’ on the Vietnam/Cambodia issue and devoted a good portion of the resources and diplomatic capital of his department in pursuit of that role over the next two years. The initiative, which Hayden suggested was ‘misunderstood or perhaps misconstrued’ by ASEAN (quoted in Dobell, 1996:11), served only to alienate the grouping. When, by 1985, it became obvious that it was attracting no support from any of the parties with significant interests in the conflict, Hayden abandoned the initiative. Not until 1988, when Australia again co-sponsored the ASEAN Cambodian resolution, did ASEAN accept that Australia was not attempting to erode its stance on the Indochina problems (Evans and Grant, 1991:209).

When Hayden was replaced by the energetic Gareth Evans in September 1988, the new Foreign Minister set about systematically reorienting Australian foreign policy towards closer engagement with Asia. In a short period, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade launched a plethora of initiatives—on Antarctica, on chemical weapons, on a comprehensive test ban treaty, on Cambodia again, and on Asia–Pacific Economic Cooperation. Evans justified the new activism on the grounds that Australia, as a middle power,
was uniquely placed in a rapidly changing international environment to play
the role of policy entrepreneur and coalition broker. Moreover, its obligation as
a good international citizen dictated that it should pursue such opportunities.
The avalanche of initiatives from Canberra undoubtedly caused some dis-
comfort in ASEAN capitals—not least because Australia appeared to be
usurping the role of regional leadership that ASEAN coveted.

Under Evans, however, Australian foreign policy showed far greater
concern than in the past about ASEAN sensitivities. Nowhere was this more
obvious than in the APEC initiative (which originated in the office of Prime
Minister Hawke rather than in Foreign Affairs and Trade). Australian
governments had become sensitised to ASEAN concerns on regional economic
issues through the deliberations of PECC. At the first PECC meeting in
Canberra in 1980, the participants agreed that ‘it would be necessary to work
on a cautious and gradual basis...through a process of consensus among
regional countries similar to that by which ASEAN itself has developed’
(Crawford, 1994:102). Canberra realised that ASEAN support was essential if
APEC was to be successful and that a similar cautious process of consensus
building would be required. Evans wrote that selling the APEC concept
‘involved countless rounds of senior official and bilateral ministerial consul-
tations, with an emphasis throughout on exploration and consensus rather than
prescription and pressure...we had to be acutely sensitive to the desire of
ASEAN not to be subsumed, and institutionally overwhelmed, in a wider
regional process’ (Evans and Grant, 1991:124).

ASEAN initially opposed APEC on the grounds that no new regional
forum was necessary—an expanded ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference could
perform the necessary coordinating function in promoting economic
cooperation among ASEAN and its dialogue partners. ASEAN’s initial
opposition was eventually overcome, and its member states participated in the
first APEC ministerial meeting in Canberra in November 1989. But the
grouping made a strong statement at an unprecedented joint meeting of
economic and foreign ministers in Kuching in February 1990 of the conditions
for ASEAN participation in APEC. These included:

- Pacific economic cooperation should be based on independence, mutual
  respect and equality;
- It should complement ASEAN’s regional activities and role in the Pacific,
  and should strengthen multilateral mechanisms for cooperation,
  particularly the GATT;
• It should not lead to the creation of an economic bloc or an exclusive trading arrangement;

• It should be developed in a gradual fashion and be properly planned (Wanandi, 1990:38).

By placing emphasis on ‘open regionalism’ and ‘coordinated unilateralism’ as the key principles for APEC, the Australian government has, with the brief exception of a period of wavering in the first half of 1995, supported ASEAN’s consensual, gradualist approach to economic cooperation, as outlined in the Kuching consensus, rather than the legally-binding formula favoured by the North Americans.

Under the Labor governments, Canberra showed far less concern for the sensitivities of some ASEAN states on another proposed economic grouping—Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir’s East Asian Economic Group (later reduced to the status of ‘Caucus’). Australian ministers were as outspoken as their American counterparts in opposition to the proposal. The EAEC represented an alternative geographical basis for constructing regional economic cooperation—one, it seemed, that would automatically exclude Australia because of its inability to claim ‘Asian’ status. For the Australian government, it appeared to represent a worst case scenario—the negation of Australian efforts to engage more closely with the region. The failure of the Australian government to secure an invitation to the first Asia–Europe meeting (ASEM) appeared to confirm Australian fears of the inevitability of its exclusion from a grouping defined—either by reference to geography or culture—as ‘Asian’.

Prime Minister Mahathir’s use of the veto power afforded by the ASEAN insistence on consensus excluded Australia from ASEM. On other issues, however, Australian diplomacy benefited from divisions within ASEAN. In particular, Prime Minister Keating, by showing deference to the region’s elder statesman, President Suharto, was able to capitalise on regional leadership tensions between Jakarta and Kuala Lumpur. In encouraging Suharto to play a major role in moving APEC forwards at the Bogor summit, Australia helped engineer what might be viewed as an anti-Mahathir diplomatic coup. Certainly, these episodes indicate the importance of personal relationships—both positive and negative—in diplomacy between Australia and the region.

**The security realm**

In APEC, Australian diplomatic activism helped promote a trans-regional forum as an alternative to an ASEAN-based grouping for promoting economic
cooperation. In the security realm, similar Australian efforts were initially rebuffed. Through the ASEAN Regional Forum, the ASEAN grouping has established its primacy in organising discussion on Asia–Pacific security issues.

In 1989, Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs, Gareth Evans, issued a major statement on regional security in which he urged that Australia should seek ‘comprehensive engagement’ with the region. The statement built on a series of official reports on Australian defence, beginning with the *Australian Defence Review* of 1972. These had emphasised that the fundamental objective of Australian policy should be the independence and security of Australia rather than forward defence in Asia in alliance with the United States. Successive reports developed the theme that Australia, in the foreseeable future, would be unlikely to suffer a major military attack. Rather, threats to Australian security were likely to be of a low level such as incursions on the northern shores or disruption to shipping lanes (Dibb, 1997). The changing security environment, Evans argued, suggested the need for a new approach whereby Australia should participate ‘actively in the gradual development of a regional security community based on a sense of shared security interests’. ‘In vigorously pursuing its national interests in the region’, Evans continued, Australia ‘should do so as a confident and natural partner in a common neighbourhood of remarkable diversity, rather than as a cultural misfit trapped by geography’ (Evans, 1989:paragraph 176).

Evans followed up the 1989 statement with several speeches that endorsed the idea of ‘common security’ in the Asia–Pacific region, and the need to establish a regional framework similar to the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This proposal found support only from Canada; both the United States and ASEAN voiced strong opposition to the Evans idea. For ASEAN, the Australian and Canadian proposals were typical of the Western preference for legalistic institutions rather than the dialogue and consensus-building approach preferred by Asian countries. Evans, anxious to secure the support of ASEAN, then retreated to advocate a more modest security agenda; he now placed emphasis on the importance of dialogue rather than institution-building. The way was open for ASEAN to seize the initiative by proposing at the July 1991 Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) that the PMC was the ‘appropriate base’ for the discussion of regional security issues. This pronouncement began the process that led to the security component of the PMC being renamed the ASEAN Regional Forum [ARF] in 1994 (for further discussion see Ball and Kerr, 1996; Kerr, Mack and Evans, 1995). Although
ASEAN was the centrepiece of the new forum, the structure and *modus operandi* of the ARF bore a striking resemblance to the revised Evans proposal.

Australia has strongly supported the ARF both directly and indirectly—through the active role that Australian institutions have played in second track diplomacy such as CSCAP (the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific). Privately, however, some senior officials have expressed concern that ASEAN’s insistence on playing a central role in Asia–Pacific regional security issues may hinder efforts to resolve the security problems of Northeast Asia (for similar arguments see Leifer, 1996).

The primary focus of this article has been on Australia’s relations with ASEAN as a multilateral institution. Such relations can only be understood, however, by placing them in the context of the totality of Australia’s relations with ASEAN member states. And it is in the security realm where these have changed most dramatically in the last decade. By the early 1990s, the forces of each ASEAN member state were undertaking more joint exercises with the Australia military than with that of any other country, including other ASEAN members. Australia supplies weaponry and training (including anti-terrorist and special operations instruction) to all members of the pre-expansion ASEAN Six.\(^\text{10}\) Political squabbles, for instance, the deterioration in relations with Malaysia following Prime Minister Keating’s remark that his Malaysian counterpart was a ‘recalcitrant’ for failing to participate in the APEC Seattle summit, have not disrupted the significant expansion in cooperative defence relations.

In some domains, the idea of common security appears to have taken hold—for instance, in May 1996, the Australian government agreed that it would share with its Indonesian counterpart data from the country’s Jindalee early warning radar network. Yet at other times more traditional concepts of security have surfaced. Prime Minister Paul Keating, as well as Foreign Minister Evans suggested on various occasions that Australia had a common interest, with other middle powers of Southeast Asia, in balancing the pull of the great powers in the region. And the desire to promote cooperative security (bolstered by the commercial imperative of selling weapons to the region) has

\(^{10}\) In August 1997, talks between Australian and Vietnamese officials, attending in a ‘private capacity’, led to a proposal for the exchange of defence attachés as the first step in establishing a formal defence relationship. The two countries will establish an official security dialogue in 1998. I am grateful to Pauline Kerr for this information.
clashed with concerns that Australia’s technological edge in security is being eroded.

**Adjusting to the ASEAN way**

The election of a conservative Coalition government in the March 1996 election again led to a change in emphasis in Australia’s relations with ASEAN. John Howard used the occasion of his first foreign visit as Prime Minister—to Indonesia—to state unequivocally that ‘we do not claim to be Asian’ and that he did not see ‘Australia as a bridge between Asia and the West’ (Howard, 1996:3). The speech, apparently aimed primarily at the Australian audience, appeared to bemuse his hosts—and restated the argument that Prime Minister Mahathir had given for Australia’s exclusion from the EAEC and ASEM. Compounded by other developments—the government’s cancellation of its mixed credits scheme, the Development Import Finance Facility (of which almost a half had gone to Indonesia in recent years), its emphasis on strengthening the security relationship with the United States, and its initial failure to criticise the racist remarks of a newly elected independent MP\(^1\)—the speech gave the impression of a government floundering in its attempts to redefine Australia’s relations with Asia in general and ASEAN in particular.

While some of the government’s problems were of its own making, other more deeply rooted issues of Australia’s engagement with Asia remained

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\(^1\) Ms Pauline Hanson was elected as an Independent member of the House of Representatives at the March 1996 election after the Liberal Party had de-selected her as its candidate following her racist remarks. Ms Hanson subsequently has been outspoken in her criticism of Asian immigration to Australia, and the rights of aboriginal Australians. She has launched her own political party, One Nation, which has attracted between 5 and 10 per cent support in public opinion polls. Prime Minister John Howard, and Opposition leader Kim Beazley, were both slow to criticise Ms Hanson, apparently fearful of an electoral backlash. The 1996 Australian Electoral Survey does show considerable public unease at current levels of immigration—64 per cent believed that immigration had gone too far, 30 per cent believed that government policies were ‘about right’. Ms Hanson’s comments, and the initial failure of the government to repudiate them, are widely perceived as having damaged Australia’s image in Asia, in that they have revived memories of the white Australia policy, and as having harmed Australia’s economic prospects in the region, particularly its attractiveness as a location for Asian students.
unresolved. As Stephen FitzGerald (1997), Australia's first ambassador to the People's Republic of China, points out, the Australian government has yet to decide what is non-negotiable in its relations with Asia. Some of Australia's diplomatic problems with ASEAN states and their leaders, especially Prime Minister Mahathir, have resulted from the lack of sensitivity of Australian Prime Ministers to the ASEAN concern with 'face'. Examples are Hawke's description of Malaysia's decision to hang two convicted Australian drug Mahathir was a 'recalcitrant' (for a useful discussion of the roots of Australia's recent problems with Malaysia see Searle, 1996). Use of more diplomatic language on such issues would seem to impose no great constraint on Australian foreign policy autonomy.

To refrain from public criticism of the human rights policies of ASEAN governments is more problematic, not least because of pressure from Australian interest groups and those in ASEAN countries, and press criticism. In recent years, such groups have made unfavourable comparisons between the official positions taken by the Australian and US governments on human rights issues. In a major speech on relations with Asia in 1997, Prime Minister Howard provided what appears to be a succinct commitment to the 'ASEAN I do not see that public hectoring or lecturing other countries about their shortcomings or differences from us is appropriate behaviour for a neighbour or indeed likely to promote our interests or our values. Equally, Australia herself does not expect to be on the receiving end of lectures. We have the same right to our values and sensitivities and the same right to demand respect for them. Mutual respect has to be a two-way thing (Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 1997).

In reality, government policy has been more equivocal. While arguing against the application of sanctions against Burma and, contrary to the US position, that Burmese membership of ASEAN was a matter only for ASEAN to decide, Canberra has been outspoken about the lack of progress towards democracy in Burma. No consistency is evident in government positions, however. Towards Indonesia and China the government has preferred to promote 'dialogue' and refrained from open criticism of human rights policies. Such inconsistency—while understandable from a realpolitik perspective, has rendered its policies vulnerable to the criticism that Australia is vocal on human rights issues only towards those countries that are not significant economic or diplomatic partners.
If Australian governments have moved towards adopting the ASEAN way in their diplomacy with their Southeast Asian neighbours, ASEAN states at times have shown little reciprocity—or, indeed, understanding, of the constraints under which Australian governments operate. In particular, governments in the region have reacted strongly to Australian media coverage that has been critical of their policies, for instance, articles in the Australian press on corruption in Indonesia. Similarly, ASEAN responses to Australian foreign policy initiatives that have departed from the ASEAN orthodoxy give little encouragement that the grouping has accepted the statement in the Australian Senate’s 1980 report on Australia and ASEAN that:

When differences exist or develop there is...a mutual obligation for the respective views to be recognised and treated in ways which will provide acceptable solutions, understanding must be a two-way process (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1980:4).

Conclusion

The relationship between Australia and ASEAN has changed dramatically over the last thirty years. The rapid growth that Southeast Asian states have enjoyed has considerably increased their significance for the Australian economy. The economic relationship has become far more asymmetrical as Australia has shrunk in significance as a market or source of investment for ASEAN economies. In 1997, Australia is relatively more significant as a diplomatic and military partner to ASEAN than as an economic partner.

The reorientation of Australian diplomacy towards seeking comprehensive engagement with the Asian region, and with its nearest Asian neighbours in ASEAN in particular, has necessitated not only a new diplomatic activism but also a new sensitivity to ASEAN concerns. However, whether an Australian government will ever be able wholeheartedly to embrace the ASEAN way in diplomacy is debatable. To the extent this would require Canberra to refrain from any public criticism of ASEAN governments or from putting forward alternatives to ASEAN positions, Australian governments and the Australian public are unlikely to be willing to pay the price. As Viviani (1997:164) argues, even though the unwillingness of some ASEAN states to accept Australia as part of the region is often couched in racial or geographical terms, ‘what it is really about is the difference in political values’. The suggestion by Goh Chok Tong, during Paul Keating’s visit in 1995, that Australian membership in ASEAN might be possible in the future, may take a long time to be realised.
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* Standing Orders Welcome *